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KGB agent assures US he's leaving of free will

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WASHINGTON - Soviet defector Vitaly Yurchenko, in a meeting at the State Department, last night assured US officials that he wanted to go back to the USSR and that he was doing so under his own free will, according to a State Department spokesman.

His assurances came as two top members of the Senate Intelligence Committee said their panel will look into the CIA's handling of the case, a tangled affair that has provided embarrassment for the US intelligence community, a vehicle for Soviet propaganda and many questions about the defector's motives. Yurchenko, 50, arrived at the State Department

shortly after 6 p.m., flanked by four officials from the Soviet Embassy. They met behind closed doors with six US officials for approximately a half hour, according to the spokesman, Charles Redman.

After the meeting, Yurchenko and his fellow Soviets walked out to the same Oldsmobile in which they had arrived. Asked whether he was going home, Yurchenko held his hands above his head and shook them like a champion and said, "Yes, home." Asked when, he said, "Any time."

"The United States government has decided that Mr. Yurchenko's decision to return to the Soviet Union was made of his own free will and that he is now free to leave the United States," Redman told reporters after the session.

Yurchenko, until recently the fifth highest-ranking official in the KGB, defected in the US Embassy in Rome last July, while on a mission to prepare security for Soviet scientists attending a conference on nuclear war. In September, he reportedly revealed details about Soviet spying to the CIA - among them, the identity of a former CIA official who had betrayed a double-agent in Moscow - and was heralded as one of the great intelligence assets of the decade.

Then, Monday night, much to the surprise of the US intelligence community, Yurchenko appeared at a press conference at the Soviet residential compound in Washington. He claimed he had not defected voluntarily, that the CIA had kidnapped, drugged and attempted to bribe him. He said he wanted to return to the Soviet Union.

Purpose of meeting

The purpose of last night's meeting at the State Department, said spokesman Redman, "was to determine whether [Yurchenko] was making the decision of his own free will." Said Redman, "The meeting was held in an atmosphere free of the possibility of Soviet coercion. We made it clear to Mr. Yurchenko that if he wished to remain in the United States he was free to do so. In that case he would not be subject to detention of any kind by US authorities, nor would he be returned to the custody of the Soviet authorities. Mr. Yurchenko repeated several times that he wished to return to the Soviet Union. He said that he made this decision of his own free will and denied being pressured by Soviet authorities."

Redman said a State Department doctor was present, and "determined that there was no observable evidence that Mr. Yurchenko was under the influence of drugs which could affect his behavior or that he was not competent to make his own decision to return to the USSR."

Redman said the doctor conducted no medical tests but would have had he had any doubts about Yurchenko's state of mind.

The interview with Yurchenko was conducted by William Woesser, acting assistant secretary of state for European affairs. Redman declined to identify the other five US officials or to state whether they were from the State Department or other agencies.

The only Soviet official identified was Victor Isakov, the embassy's minister counselor and, according to Redman, the only Soviet official at the meeting allowed to speak.

Panel will probe case

Meanwhile, the top two members of the Senate Intelligence Committee said the panel will investigate the CIA's handling of the Yurchenko case.

Sen. Patrick Leahy, (D-Vt.), Senate Intelligence Committee vice chairman, said Yurchenko escaped after having dinner in Georgetown, a fashionable section of Washington, on Saturday night.

"I can't understand how a person considered to be a major defector was allowed to have dinner a short distance from the Soviet Embassy," Leahy said. He "was just allowed to walk away."

In another development, US intelligence sources said Yurchenko may have defected to the West in part to be near a girlfriend in Canada and may have returned because the affair turned sour.

The sources said Yurchenko, who has a wife and a 16-year-old son in the Soviet Union, may have decided to defect to be near his al-

leged lover. She was described by the sources as the wife of a Soviet diplomat posted to Canada.

One US intelligence source, attempting to explain possible reasons for Yurchenko's surprise return to the Soviets, said of the woman in Canada: "She liked him as a spy but not as a defector."